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Christian Response to Religious Plurality: An appraisal of the Twentieth Century Christian Pluralist Approaches

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Abstract

As the modern world is getting more diverse in its sociopolitical, economic and cultural aspects in a variety of ways, the concept of religious pluralism is gaining more traction than ever before. This study explores different responses to the religious diversity developed in Christianity by theologians. It also aims to critically analyze the discourses of the Christian pluralistic approaches as the discussion on religious pluralism began in, and is still dominated by, the Christian tradition. The current study employs a qualitative methodology and content analysis approach has been used to collect and analyze the data. The research has concluded there are three basic responses to religious plurality in Christianity: “Exclusivism,” “Inclusivism” and “Religious Pluralism.” The findings also reveal that Christian pluralists embrace that religious pluralism in its general meaning recognizes the diversity of religious beliefs and systems co-existing in the society. Though there are some inadequacies in their approach, yet the pluralists consider it as a positive phenomenon and acknowledge that there are many ways to salvation in order to accept the religious other as they plead for interreligious dialogue to mitigate the religious conflicts for the sake of peaceful co-existence.

Keywords: coexistence, exclusivism, inclusivism, interfaith dialogue, religious pluralism, salvation

Introduction

In the present times, religious diversity is on the peak in all social orders. Transnational migration brings transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century that has profoundly converted the societal and ethnic landscape of large area of the world. A few mega trends in the advanced world make the expansion of religious diversity ineluctable. Redeployment takes the first place in this regard. In the Economic globalization, an ever-increasing number of individuals have gone vagrants so as to pursue venture or

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opportunities for new jobs. Furthermore, capital and monetary aptitudes, foreigners additionally bring religious theology that varies from that of the host community.¹

With increasing religious diversity, new ways of responding to other faiths have become established. A growing number of Christian scholars have abandoned the traditional claim of Christianity to absolute religious truth and sought to give expression to alternate stating relationship with other religions.² This tendency has been criticized by the scholars who continue to argue that Christianity is the only true religion and the Jesus Christ is the sole mean of salvation.

In response threefold typology have emerged in contemporary religious studies, “Inclusivism”, “Exclusivism” and “Religious Pluralism”. This paper is an attempt to throw light on the threefold typology that emerged in Christianity to cope with the challenges of the religious diversity. The study focuses on and critically examines the theological, anthropocentric and classical development of discourses of the Religious Pluralism in the context of tolerance and co-existence in the multi religious societies.

2. Inclusivism, Exclusivism and Pluralism

In response to the increasing religious diversity in the society, three traditional responses can be discerned in the work of the Christian theologians. These responses have usually been identified as Inclusivism, Exclusivism, and Pluralism.

2.1. Inclusivism

The Religious inclusivism is a methodology that manages the associations between religions. Inclusivism sustains, though there are different religious traditions but the differences between religions have been overcome by the Christ. As a representative of inclusivism, Gavin D’Costa writes that the inclusivism model “affirms the salvific presence of God in non-Christian religions while still maintaining that Christ is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God”³.

In spite of the fact that the prospect for salvation of different religions is not absolutely dismissed, the authoritative case of inclusivity, as declared, indicates that exclusively they have every bit of relevant information. At this juncture, the theory of Anonymous Christians created by Karl Rahner in his detailed written composition,⁴ sanctioned

¹Giuseppe Giordan, and Enzo Pace, ed., *Religious Pluralism: Framing Religious Diversity in the Contemporary World* (Springer International Publishing, 2014), 2-3.

²David Pitman, *Twentieth Century Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism: Difference is Everything* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3.

³Gavin D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1986), 80.

⁴Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigation*, vol.5 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1996).

Theological Investigations. Rahner traditionally gives authority to the church and his strong Christology reflects in his response to the other world religions.⁵

In Catholic custom such theory obeys in as a primary postulate of inclusivism according to which Christ would protect non-Christians against any harm, instead of their own religions, since Christianity was dismissed, they may be dedicated to those qualities in real life which have great significance in the Christian disclosure. Pluralism is utilized reciprocally to such inclusivism within Rahner's written works. He says:

Pluralism is implied here as a reality which should be pondered and one which without denying that to some extent in any event it ought not exist by any means ought to be joined again from an increasingly raised perspective into the entirety and solidarity of the Christian conception of human presence.⁶

With regard to the conception in Christianity about human presence, in the opinion of Rahner, it should be noted that non-Christians are people who have never heard the *Christian* Gospel. Rahner states:

It is nevertheless absolutely permissible for the Christian himself to interpret this non-Christianity as Christianity of an anonymous kind which he does always still go out to meet as a missionary. Seeing it as a world which is to be brought to the explicit consciousness of what already belongs to it as a divine offer or already pertains to it also over and above this as a divine gift of grace accepted implicitly.⁷

Inclusivism acknowledges that although the grace of God reflects from all the great world religions but on the other side it also holds to the belief that there is salvation in Christ alone. Alan Race asserts:

Inclusivism in the Christian theology of religions is both an acceptance and a rejection of the other faiths, a dialectical 'yes' and 'no'. On the one hand it accepts the spiritual power and depth manifested in them, so that they can properly be called a locus of divine presence. On the other hand, it rejects them as not being sufficient for salvation apart from Christ, for Christ alone is saviour. To be inclusive is to believe that all non-Christian religious truth belongs ultimately to Christ and the way of discipleship which springs from him.⁸

2.2. Exclusivism

Religious exclusivism from the threefold typology states that only one religion has the absolute comprehension of God, reality and salvation. As Diana states: "Exclusivism is

⁵David Pitman, *Twentieth Century Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism: Difference is everything* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 94.

⁶Rahner, *Theological Investigation*, vol. 5 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1996), 116.

⁷Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, no. 5, 133.

⁸Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM P, 1983), 38.

more than just a persuasion about the transformative intensity of the specific vision one has; it is a feeling about its certainty and its supreme need over contending perspectives.”⁹

According to Race, the historical backdrop of the Abrahamic beliefs is exclusivism. Race confers that the concept of exclusivism indeed goes back to the teachings of the “the Holy Bible” and the “the Holy Qur’ān.”¹⁰ The Christian exclusivists justify “Jesus as they declare that no one else comes to the Father but through Him as He is the only way and reality and the life.”¹¹ After Jesus passed away, his follower Peter openly declared, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”¹²

Furthermore, the Holy Qur’ān states, “If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to Allah), never will it be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter He will be in the ranks of those who have lost.”¹³

While no emphasis is made on salvation in Judaism, as mentioned in the First Commandment is “You shall have no other gods before me.”¹⁴ Meanwhile exclusivism keeps Christianity under extreme consideration; every religion has a large and fundamental division that becomes part of exclusivist category. D’costa (b.1958) identifies it as if a person associates himself with Buddhism or Hinduism or Islam or absolutely follows pluralism, every interpretation expresses that only one single disclosure or only one religion is valid and every single other “revelation” or religions are false.¹⁵

Historical studies recognize that Christianity revealed exorbitant genres of exclusivism; Pratt affirms emphatically that numerous fundamentalist religions go in for acquiring that title, with Islam driving other commendable contenders in such modes that are sometimes imperceptible.¹⁶ In Myanmar, as a result of the violent removal of people of Rohingya, the Buddhist Rakhine have made consolidation in the positions of fundamentalists who were ready to fall back on slaughtering to accomplish strength over contending religions.¹⁷ Because of the exclusivist argument to suppress the falsehoods taught by other religions, some protestant sects contend brutally against Roman

⁹Douglas Pratt, “Exclusivism and Exclusivity: A Contemporary Theological Challenge,” *Pacifica: Journal of the Melbourne College of Divinity* 20, no.3 (2007): 296.

¹⁰Alan Race, “Theologies of Religions in Change: Factors in the Shape of a Debate,” in *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths*, ed. Paul Hedges and Alan Race (London: SCM, 2008), 14.

¹¹Gospel 14: 6.

¹²Peter, Acts 4:12.

¹³Āl-Qur’ān Āl ‘Imrān 3:85.

¹⁴Exodus 20:3.

¹⁵Gavin D’Costa, “The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions,” *Religious Studies* 32, no. 2 (1996): 223-32, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20019811>.

¹⁶Douglas Pratt, “Exclusivism and Exclusivity: A Contemporary Theological Challenge,” *Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies* 20, no. 3 (October 2007): 297, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1030570X0702000304>.

¹⁷Pratt, “Exclusivism and Exclusivity,” 297.

Catholicism, and fundamentalist Christians of all kinds teach that religious practices like those of Paganism and witchcraft are malicious. This was common historical attitude prior to the enlightenment. In the age of enlightenment, Pluralism was born out of a criticism of exclusivism saying that no religion has monopoly on revelation or salvation that brings the decline of Christianity after French Revolution.

2.3. Religious Pluralism

Pluralism has acquired third status which the various individual scholars have adopted lately. In accordance with this aspect, there is no superiority in any particular religious perspective and with some variations in more than one fundamental mystical framework thence they are immediate to reality on equal level.¹⁸

The word 'pluralism' comes under primary stage, As Francis Clooney has given his opinion, 'pluralism' is "a word of many meanings."¹⁹ The term *descriptively* is interpreted as a synonym for 'diversity.' At this level the intention for religious 'pluralism' is to indicate the fact about existence of majority of religions or, maybe, those they exist in mutual proximity.²⁰ Furthermore, the term *normatively* is expressed to provide a specific scholarly or potentially attitudinal reaction to religious diversity. In this situation "pluralism", alludes to "a description of majority, an assessment of religious and social assortment."²¹ In particular, religious diversity as explained by a pluralist would, proclaim the 'rough parity' of the world's religious practices.

As the word pluralism means, the condition of being plural or multiple thus the religious pluralism is a philosophy that all religions are equally valid and true²² and in contrast to superiority claims of the religions which may undermine the credibility of all the religions, religious pluralism appreciate the religious diversity which can be shared differently or in tradition specific ways by different religions.²³

Authentic cultural pluralism opens the door to a religious pluralism grounded in an ecumenical, interfaith communion. This age of interfaith consciousness, where religions

¹⁸Basinger David, "Religious Diversity (Pluralism)," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring, 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/religious-pluralism>

¹⁹Francis Clooney, "Review of Paul Knitter's No Other Name, etc.," *Religious Studies Review* 15 (1989): 199.

²⁰Paul Rhodues Eddy, *John Hick's Pluralist Philosophy of World Religions* (Routledge, 2018).

²¹Diana Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 191.

²²George C. Asadu, Benjamin C. Diara, and Nicholas Asogwa, "Religious Pluralism and its Implications for Church Development," *HTS Theological Studies* 76 (3): 19. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i3.5955>

²³Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Pluralist Approaches in Some Major Non-Christian Religions," in *Twenty-first Century Theologies of Religions: Retrospection and Future Prospects*, eds., Elizabeth J. Harris, Paul Hedges and Shanthikumar Hettiarachchi (Brill Rodopi, 2016), 180.

are meeting face to face, can open up dialogue that eschews dogmatic hegemonism in favor of empathy for the “other,” even celebration of the richness of diversity.

The philosophy of religious pluralism brings many problems to Christian theology and churches.²⁴ The following section will present divergent Christian approaches to religious pluralism as found in modern theological literature in the twentieth century, John Hick who is considered theocentric Pluralist, Wilfred Cantwell Smith as anthropocentric Pluralist and Hans Küng as classical pluralist.

3. Pluralists Approaches in Christianity

In Christianity, most notable figure to defend the philosophy of religious pluralism was John Hick. According to Hick, religions are different intellectual responses to the same Ultimate Reality. Consequently, the adherents of different religions can eventually engage in the dialogue in order to explore to truth. He writes:

Another possibility must seem the most probable, namely that there is but one God, who is maker and lord of all; that in his infinite fullness and richness of being he exceeds all our human attempt to grasp him in thought; and that the devout in the various great world religions are in fact worshiping that one God, but through different overlapping concepts or mental icons of him.²⁵

For Hick, as there is only one religious’ truth in the world so, the followers of different religions can learn from each other’s imperfect religious knowledge. John Hick viewed religious diversity in its broader meaning where no religion has monopoly over the truth or the life of eternal salvation. Hick has a very different concept of salvation. He sees salvation as a process of human transformation from this life to a new orientation centered in the transcendent divine reality, God, leading to its fulfillment beyond this life. The main idea on which Hick builds his theory of religious pluralism is that transcendental reality is ungraspable to human intellect. Therefore, there is a huge difference between God in Himself and God in human knowledge. Hick argues:

Every religious tradition has its myths and these myths serve the same purpose in each case. In this context, it is impossible to argue that the salvation offered by Christ is unique or superior to that experience in other religions. Any such absolute claim, from within any one of the religions, can only ever be dogma beyond verifications.²⁶

Hick proposes a Copernican revolution in response to the “inclusivist” and “exclusivist” approaches to world religions which place Christianity at the center of the

²⁴Eeuwout Klootwijk, “Christian Approaches to Religious Pluralism: Diverging Models and Patterns,” *Missiology* 21, no. 4 (1993): 455-468. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009182969302100408>.

²⁵John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 66-67; see also *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 100-101.

²⁶Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 177.

universe. He says, a Copernican revolution in theology is needed to deal adequately with the issues of religious pluralism in general and the relationship of Christianity with other world religions in particular.

Now a Copernican revolution in astronomy consisted in a transformation in the way in which men understood the universe and their own location within it. It involved a shift from the dogma that the earth is the centre of the revolving universe to the realisation that it is the sun that is at the centre, with all the planets, including our earth moving around it. And the needed Copernican theology is needed in theology involves an equally radical transformation in our conception of the universe of the faiths and place of our own religion within it. It involves a shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre, and that all the religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around him.²⁷

Since Hick describes God as “ineffable Real”, he states that it is only human cognitive responses to God, which emerged in different historio-cultural situations, that are known to people but the reality of God is unknowable. Therefore, providing that no one can know the divine reality in itself, it means, in Hick’s opinion, that all religions are true since they represent different human perceptions of God.

Discussing the above-mentioned idea of religious pluralism, Hans Küng (1991) argues that “it is not a solution for achieving peace among religions, rather a strategy which he calls “the strategy of embrace.”²⁸ Although this strategy may appear to suggest toleration, according to Küng:

[It actually] proves to be a kind of conquest through embrace, a matter of allowing validity through domestication, integration through a loss of identity. No serious religion which seeks to remain true to itself will allow this to happen to it.²⁹

Like other pluralists Küng argues that no religion has right to claim a monopoly on truth including Christianity because there is true and false in every religion and the critical approach to position the others must precede with truthful self-criticism.³⁰ To accept the finality of Jesus does not mean to deny the truth of others religion whose followers hold the same exclusivist view regarding their own faith. Kung writes: “Holding fast to this two thousand years old conviction of Truth without anguish or apologetic concern, but on good grounds, in the way that Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists do to theirs is, however, in

²⁷Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 130-31.

²⁸Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1991), 80.

²⁹Ibid., 81.

³⁰Küng, “Synthesis: Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Religions: Some Theses for Clarification,” in *Christianity Among World Religions*, eds. H. Küng, J. Moltmann and M. Lefebure (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1986), 121.

no way identical with some theological ‘imperialism’ and ‘neo-colonialism’, which denies other religions their truth and reject other prophets and seers.”³¹

Kung contends that the issue of conflicting truth claims cannot be solved by ignoring the contradictions and nor can be resolved by seeking that all symbols, revelations and profession of faith in Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism are valid and true.³² He emphasized to avoid the Relativism which means all standards and values are matter of equal indifferences.³³

Küng concludes that there are different true religions and different ways of salvation which both overlap and can enrich each other. The starting point for dialogue, he argues, is not the assumption of equal truth and validity but a conviction regarding the normativity of one’s own religion, its inherent truth and the particular ‘bearer of revelation or bringer of salvation’ that is central to its teaching. “There is scarcely a need to engage in discussion if there is in the end nothing normative and definitive in any religion”.³⁴

Instead of entering endless discussions about the truth and salvations which are strongly theological issues, it seems that Küng tries to move the question of religious pluralism to a more ethical level rather than to the theological one. In his book *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethics*, he views the moral crisis in the postmodern world as an opportunity to gather all religions under mutual responsibility for rescuing the world from such a crisis. However, since religions are not supposed to succeed in any mutual project before achieving peace between them, Küng proposes his theory of religious pluralism which he calls “ecumenical strategy.”³⁵ Ecumenical strategy relies, on the one hand, on the idea that all major religions have potential spiritual and ethical wealth which can lay common religious foundations for human values, where the universal ethical criterion is human dignity. On the other hand, it is of paramount importance that each religion should realize through self-criticism that “the boundary between truth and untruth is not a priori identical with the boundary between one’s own religion and any others.”³⁶

In the twentieth century, Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000 CE) was considered as most distinguished historians in the meadow of comparative religion.³⁷ There have been several aspects in his academic personality like linguistic and historical learning, as a comparativist, a philosophers, theologians, scientists and a writer who was aware of the

³¹Ibid., 122.

³²Kung, *Theology for the Third Millennium*, 2nd edn., (London: Harper Collins, 1991), 234.

³³Ibid., 235.

³⁴Küng, “Synthesis: Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Religions,” 123.

³⁵Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*, 85.

³⁶Ibid., 81.

³⁷James C. Livingston, “Religious Pluralism and the Question of Religious Truth in Wilfred C. Smith,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 3 and 4 (2003): 58-65, <https://jcrt.org/archives/04.3/livingston.pdf>.

significance of the learning of religious traditions at his age and that “the study of the religious traditions lies at the center of this critical turning point in our worldwide web of cultures and religions.”³⁸ Contrary to John Hick philosophy of religious pluralism, Smith accepts that the religions are shaped by different historical and cultural contexts and each religion holds true but imperfect notion of ultimate reality or God.

As all religions have imperfect conception of divine reality, consequently there are different paths of salvation.³⁹ In another discourse⁴⁰ Smith traces the development of the concept of religion. He argues that the use of the word religion to different faith traditions for example in Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, etc., as commonly exclusive belief system is completely a western Idea.

The conception of religion depicted different religions in a way that because conflicting ideologies or doctrinal truths religions are standing against each other. In Smith’s estimation, these conflicts have had the devastating influence of preventing inter-faith dialogue in its tracks. When beliefs are given primary importance, they increase differences, confusions, doubts, and clashes that describe our day-to-day religious life. As Smith noted:

A devout person, whose sense of the presence of God is both vivid and sincere...may plead for God’s mercy and humbly know the quiet transport of its assurance because of his personal and living faith that God is indeed merciful. At that moment the truth of that man’s religiousness is perhaps a different matter from the question of the earthly path by which he arrived at his awareness of his faith, or of the community of which he is a member.⁴¹

It is evident here that for Smith religious truth has, then, to do with the interiorizing and living out a form of life. For example, the Muslims’ personal interiorizing of the teachings of the *holy Qur’an* or the Buddhist’s personal and sincere appropriation of the Buddha’s *Dharma*. And the truth of these religions is confirmed in the liberating act of faith. So, for Smith, it is erroneous to ask the question whether the various multiform, cumulative traditions are true. Smith argues that the truth is not found in religions but in the faithfulness and integrity of the persons. He wrote, “It is dangerous and impious to suppose that Christianity [or Buddhism or Islam, etc.] is true, as...something “out there” impersonally subsisting...Christianity is not true absolutely, impersonally, statically; rather it can *become* true, if and as you or I appropriate it to ourselves and interiorize it, in so far as we live it out from day to day.”⁴²

³⁸Livingston, “Religious Pluralism and the Question of Religious Truth in Wilfred C. Smith,” 58.

³⁹Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 12.

⁴⁰Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (USA: The Macmillan Company, 1963), 7-10.

⁴¹Smith, *Questions of Religious Truth* (New York: L Scribners, 1967), 1-7.

⁴²Smith, *Questions of Religious Truth*, 68.

So, according to Smith it is erroneous to find out the truth-claims of religions in their competing terms and these “cumulative traditions” must be regarded as different paths in search for truth. These are the ways that are necessarily different from one another. Consequently, the Christian and the Muslims are idolatrous in their claim that one’s religion has the final truth about God and eternal salvation.

To explain his vision of religion and belief, Smith has introduced the contrasting notions of “personal faith” and the “cumulative traditions”. Personal faith, which Smith views as a universal human quality that spans all divisions of culture, ethnicity and religious traditions, is by far the more important of the two, since it has reference to one’s relationship with ultimate reality as one conceives it. As Smith writes: “Faith is an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one’s neighbor, to the universe; a total response; a way of seeing the world and of handling it; a capacity to live at more than a mundane level; to see, to feel, to act in terms of, transcendent dimensions.”⁴³

For the sake of people’s humanity, Smith urges for the world community, is for human kind to know each other through becoming one community. For this goal, Smith urges, entails both respect and equality. “Our solidarity precedes our particularity; and is part of our self-transcendence. The truth of all of us is the part of the truth of each of us.”⁴⁴ For the world community, Smith urges for world theology. Smith asserts that world theology is necessary because to write an authentic theology of religions from within the perspective of one tradition is not possible. For example, a Christian theology of religions, on the one hand bearing the risk of being seen as relativist or seen as dogmatic on the other hand.⁴⁵ When Smith wrote *Towards a World Theology*, he looked optimistic for the positive outcome in regard to process he envisioned.⁴⁶ But an element of doubt appeared in his work within a few years.⁴⁷

4. Appraisal of Pluralist Discourses in Christianity

The spectrum of the Christian responses to religious pluralism is not static but very divergent as they abandoned the exclusivist claim of Christianity and pursued to give expressions to alternative ways of stating its relationship with different religions of the world. The spectrum of the Christian pluralists must be reviewed as they come up with many problems, inadequacies, errors and limitations in their pluralist stance.

John Hick’s understanding of the philosophy of religious pluralism appears to disregard the divine revelation throughout human existence as a real manifestation, since he sees human cognitive responses to the divine reality as the origin of religions.

⁴³Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 49.

⁴⁴Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 79.

⁴⁵Ibid., 109.

⁴⁶Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 102.

⁴⁷Smith, “Mission, Dialogue, and God’s Will for Us,” *International Review of Mission* 78 (1988): 373.

Consequently, this perception of religious pluralism could result in seeing different religious particularities as problems between religions.

A significant instance of Hicks' overall approach is to be found in his lack of and clear notion of revelation. His concept of religions is human centered as he begins with the religious beliefs and practices available on a world-wide scale and on their bases concluded that different religious traditions represent different responses to same ultimate reality. This brings him into immediate conflict with prophetic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, each of which has a strong doctrine of revelation. There are also some problems in his concept of Trinity and salvation. In fact, Hick seems show his intent in his Christology to eliminate anything at all that might cause offence.

Gavin D'Costa closely examines Hick's proposition of religious pluralism. After severe criticism and rejection of such pluralism, D'Costa says: "There is the very real possibility that this new Copernican development in Hick's pluralist paradigm relies on agnostic presuppositions."⁴⁸ D'Costa tries to hold together these seemingly contradictory, but most important Christian axioms in order to strike the balance between dealing with the challenges posed by other religions and preserving the central beliefs of Christianity. Thus, D'Costa concludes that: "All salvation is salvation through the grace of God in Christ. However, since Christian Gospel has not reached all people, through no fault of their own, it means that God must somehow offer grace to all those who have never properly encountered the Gospel. This offer, according to the author, must be made available through the non-Christian's religions which "have a limited validity up to the time of a real encounter with Christianity."⁴⁹

Like Hick, Smith uses the language of Pluralism, he asks the Christians to speak of Jesus "My Lord|" instead of "The Lord."⁵⁰ But this is clear that a primary Christian doctrine cannot be so easily set aside, even when dialogue is pursued in an open hearted and genuine manner. Smith seems to be occupied with other issues rather than Christological approach in his work.

Moreover, Smith seems to be so occupied with building community that he is in danger of replacing pluralism with a synthesis grounded in a theology of compromise. On the one side Smith seems to proclaim world community but on the other side he himself shows uncertainty about building this community as Smith once wrote: "I have no idea whether it will be practically feasible to build a better world... We may fail, as Christians and others have failed in part to actualize their vision to which God has severally called us."⁵¹

⁴⁸Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1986), 40.

⁴⁹Ibid., 111.

⁵⁰Smith, "An attempt at Summation," in *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, G. H. Anderson, and T. F. Stransky, eds. (Maryknoll, Ny: Orbis Books).

⁵¹Smith, "Mission, Dialogue, and God's Will for Us," 373.

So, Smith's own uncertainty regarding building a community is justified because his strategy for achieving his goal is perhaps unworkable. However, Smith espouses the noble vision as there is a strong element in Smith's work which seeks to down-play the differences in the quest for common ground.

Küng seems to offer the most balanced perspective as compared to that of other pluralists as he is not only willing to incorporate the "ideals" of different religions but also accept the absolute "realities" that exists in our contemporary world. It seems that Küng has deliberately moved from an inclusivist to pluralist stance as the language of confrontation is replaced by the enrichment of dialogue and mutual learning and the emphasis on the idea that Christianity should be considered as the ultimate fulfilment of other religions is replaced by a concept of recognition of the truth and realities of other religions. Küng says: "The more I read, travel, speak, listen, experience, the clearer it has become to me that dialogue between the religion is no remote academic affair. Rather dialogue is a political and religious necessity, a foundation for peace between the nations."⁵²

There is a close affinity between Küng's ideas of religious pluralism and that of Jonathan Sacks who is a British Orthodox rabbi, philosopher and theologian. He defines human dignity as a central notion to the issue of religious pluralism. However, this dignity should be sought and respected not only in what is common between human beings, but also and most importantly in what is different between them. Sacks criticizes the Platonic idea in *The Republic* that religious truth is universal or in other words, that it is the same for everyone at all the times. He states that religious truth is particular for every religion and that is what endears one towards one's religion. Therefore, every person must be allowed to live by the faith which seems true to them. Religions must abandon their historic goal of imposing a single truth on a plural globe. This notion is alien to Abrahamic faith and it found its root originally in the Greek and the Roman imperialism.⁵³

As a pluralist, Küng constantly emphasized on dialogue as a need for mutual discussion in relation to interfaith problems and for mutual challenges which people of multi-faith must face in the contemporary world.

5. Conclusion

Since the study reflected the Christian responses to religious diversity in three broader categories: Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Religious Pluralism, it has been identified that different responses to the reality of religious pluralism can be discerned in the work of Christian Pluralist and they argue that all religions traditions have equal claim to be bearer of the Truth, all religions are genuine, though there are different pathways to salvation. As classical pluralists Küng argues that differences between the religions are many and should

⁵²Küng, *What I Believe* (eBook), J. Bowden, trans., (London: Continuum, 2009).

⁵³Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (Continuum; 2nd edition, 2003).

not be minimized and avoided. He advocates dialogues as the means by which the followers of different religious traditions can gain knowledge and understanding of one another and experience mutual challenge and enrichment. Similarly, John Hick being as a theocentric pluralist and Smith as anthropocentric pluralist founder in terms of dialogue, they both each in his own way, diminishes the sense of uniqueness which is so important for the life and identity of each religious tradition. This too generates a barrier to dialogue and relationship. So, the Hans Küng's response seems to offer much creative and positive future in relationship among the world religions.

To sum up the insights of the pluralist approach in Christianity are manifold. The Pluralists on the contrary to the exclusivist in Christianity recognize that there are many ways to salvation. They also acknowledge that not a single religious tradition can claim to keep the whole truth. For the peaceful co-existence, they plead for interreligious dialogue. In a multicultural world, the pluralists call for common enhancement, collaboration, and sharing of religious resources. The Christian pluralists offer a theological framework to proclaim the universal salvific will of God, recognize and acknowledge the resources and riches of other religious traditions of humankind but at last they also acknowledge the relative particularity of Jesus Christ.

Amidst all their excesses and mistakes, the Pluralists' approaches are source of hope that such an interreligious dialogue is indeed possible.

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